

Cuyahoga tells contractors: Days of loose ethics are over

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A repeated refrain of Cuyahoga County reform that there will be no more business as usual was shared with about 175 contractors on Thursday, during an ethics training program that was part rules instruction and part good-government sermon.

County officials and the U.S. attorney's office are leading a series of training conferences for county employees and contractors. The sessions were required in legislation adopted by the new County Council, following a sweeping corruption scandal that has netted

convictions of more than 50 contractors and public officials.

Construction company representatives packed the auditorium of the Louis Stokes Wing of Cleveland Public Library's Main Library, where speakers called for a culture change. They urged contractors to sign an honesty pledge put out by a business ethics coalition led by Steven Dettelbach, U.S. attorney for the Northern District of Ohio.

Dettelbach called on contractors not only to follow ethical standards themselves, but also to blow the whistle on any misconduct they know of.

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"We're asking if you see something, say something," he said. "Silence is no longer an option in our community."

Assistant federal prosecutors walked contractors through the case of former MetroHealth Medical Center construction manager Tom Greco, who was convicted in a bribery scheme that also involved his then-boss, John Carroll. The prosecutors said they highlighted the case to show how conspiracies fail even if money is taken in a piecemeal manner so as not to raise alarms.

Greco was sentenced in February to more than nine years in prison for accepting gift cards and other favors over eight years in exchange for helping East-West Construction obtain business with the county hospital.

The case shows not only that small bribes will be detected, but also that efforts to conceal them "is often our best evidence," said first assistant federal prosecutor Carole Rendon.

Several contractors said they appreciated information on new county ordinances pertaining to ethics, contracting and the recently created office of inspector general. The ethics law passed by the council requires contractors to register with the inspector general, and it prohibits them from giving county employees anything of value above

\$75.

Harvey Jordan of Jands Group, a Cleveland landscaping company, said he's pleased to see a level playing field for all contractors.

"I think it's the right direction," he said. "There has to be some sort of structural ethics system in place."

But one man who did not identify himself told Law Director Majeed Makhoul he feared the new rules are too arduous. "Are we in danger of going to the other extreme?" he asked.

County leaders "believe they struck the right balance," Makhoul said, but contractors should speak to the council if they think rules need to be tweaked.

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